



Restoring Ray's Films

Photographs by HIRAK SEN

Satyajit Ray had a lifelong connection to American film and its creators, and the 1955 New York premiere of his first movie, *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road), helped draw world attention to the trailblazing director even before the movie opened in commercial cinemas in Calcutta.

That link was sealed in 1992 when the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, based in Los Angeles, awarded Ray a Lifetime Achievement Oscar as he lay dying in his hospital bed.

Since then, the Academy has been restoring and preserving Ray's fragile films and was able to produce a new print of *Pather Panchali* for screening at the 2005 Cannes Festival in France.

Ray's reputation as a filmmaker who combined the unique with the universal was reinforced when *Pather Panchali* won the Best Human Document award—the first foreign honor for an Indian director—at the Cannes Festival in 1956.

"My films being about India and most specifically about Bengal, I never imagined that they would be able to cross the cultural barrier," Ray said in a 1981 SPAN interview. "The fact that it has happened has been one of my most rewarding experiences. The American cinema of the 1930s, '40s and '50s taught me almost

everything I knew about filmmaking at the time when I decided to take the plunge into the profession....I mean that I learnt both what to do and what not to do."

The 2005 screening of Ray's film at Cannes is part of a salute to the Film Foundation, set up in 1990 by 10 American movie directors to preserve and restore cinematic treasures. In the 1990s Academy preservationist David Shepard had found the original negative of *Pather Panchali* in poor condition. "Each reel has many tears in the picture area, patched either with cell overlays or with mylar tape, and in many reels bits of lost footage have been replaced with blank spacer," Shepard reported. Restorers clean film, repair scratches and fill the blanks by splicing in parts of good prints or "inter-positives" made from the original negatives. Some 20 Ray classics have been tracked down, restored, and made available for screening through the work of the Academy Film Archive, the National Film Archive of India in Pune, The Merchant and Ivory Foundation, the Ray Society in Calcutta and the Satyajit Ray Film and Study Collection at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

—Arup K. De

About the contributors: The author, Arup K. De, edits *The Salt Lake Post in Calcutta*; HIRAK SEN was a unit photographer for Ray's movies.

Above and right: Ray had an intense, passionate directing style throughout his career.

